COLLEGE REENGAGEMENT:

Strategies for Success

PRESENTED BY THE
NATIONAL DIGITAL ROUNDTABLE

THE NATIONAL DIGITAL ROUNDTABLE convened a group of experts in October 2021 to explore what higher education can do to ensure stable or growing enrollment. Many universities, even before the COVID-19 pandemic, were facing economic headwinds because of two factors: the "enrollment cliff" and increased competition from non- and for-profit online colleges.

College leaders are generally aware that there are 36 million students who started college but didn't finish. However, there is still a lack of understanding about the opportunity this presents.

This white paper is derived from the discussion that took place with:

- Malik Brown, president and CEO, Graduate! Philadelphia

- Dr. Don Hossler, author and senior scholar, Center for Enrollment Research, Policy, and Practice, University of Southern California

- Dr. Jeff Jones, vice provost emeritus, University of Central Florida

- Mike Sexton, former vice president for enrollment management, Santa Clara University

- Dr. Robert Scott, president emeritus, Adelphi University, provided analysis and perspective.

To see this roundtable in its entirety please visit: youtu.be/nDh64HzXfCo.

CONTENTS

An Untapped Enrollment Opportunity for Students and Colleges

The National Student Clearinghouse Research Center in 2019 found **36 million people** in its database had attended college since 1993 but **never earned a credential at any U.S. institution and were no longer enrolled in college.**

Lipman Hearne has identified an additional group of potential higher ed prospects: those who were **admitted but never enrolled in any college**, a group it conservatively estimates at **14 million** and calls the "nones."[1]

[1]Educationdata.org reports 3.2 million students start college in fall annually; the Hechinger Report cites research showing that up to 40% of low-income students who are admitted never attend any college. Since the number of students annually admitted to college is not known, Lipman Hearne uses enrollment data as a proxy and conservatively estimates 15% of those admitted did not attend over 29 years.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS: "AN INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY"

74%

of stop-outs attended only one college

Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce

39

Median age of stop-outs

Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce

When discussing the dilemma of postsecondary students who stopped out and admitted students who never enrolled in college, Dr. Jeff Jones said, "You have an institutional responsibility to assist these communities."

Jones has a firsthand understanding of the challenges and opportunities for adult learners. He was the first in his family to attend a university, but he dropped out with 100 credit hours, only to return at age 26 and earn a bachelor's degree. Jones has carried his life experiences with him, including when he served as vice provost at the University of Central Florida, one of the largest public universities in the United States and one of the largest institutions serving adult students online.

Jones college challenges help him relate to millions of other Americans. As previously mentioned, the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center in 2019 found 36 million people in its database had attended college since 1993 but never earned a credential at any U.S. institution and were no longer enrolled in college. This is an increase of 6.6 million (22%) since the Center's first report on this population in 2014.

In addition, the number of undergraduate students in college in fall 2021 was down 6.5 percent compared to two years ago; this was the largest two-year enrollment drop in the past 50 years. Overall, American workers, the higher ed sector, and the nation as a whole suffer when adults don't earn degrees. Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce found that those with bachelor's degrees earn 31 percent more than those with an associate's degree and 84 percent more than those with only a high school diploma.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS: "AN INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY" CONTINUED

> **"Colleges that are elegant in reengagement and re-enrollment are the ones that are winning."**
>
> Dr. Jeff Jones, vice provost emeritus, University of Central Florida

> **70% of all colleges lost enrollment in 2020. Among the 30% that grew, 70% were for-profits.**
>
> National Student Clearinghouse Research Center

Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce reported the following about these stop-outs:

- Most are nearing middle age, with a median age of 39 and an average age of 42

- 56% left postsecondary education when they were in their 20s or younger; 51% are women

- The typical American with some college, no degree, left postsecondary education a decade ago

- These people had a short college career (53% left within two years)

- Most attended one institution (74%)

- Community colleges were the starting and last-enrolled institution for two-thirds (67%)

While there is no one profile for a returning student, additional insights are known. *Crossing the Finish Line: Completing College at America's Public Universities* examined graduation rates at 21 flagship public universities and four statewide systems of public higher education. It found that "minority students and students from poor families have markedly lower graduation rates—and take longer to earn degrees—even when other variables are taken into account."

Tackling a problem as large as 36 million Americans can seem overwhelming. In Philadelphia, community leaders decided to approach the issue at a micro level, and they started with research. The Pennsylvania Economy League and the Philadelphia Workforce Investment Board commissioned a study in 2005 that found nearly 90,000 adult Philadelphia residents had started but never finished a two- or four-year college degree.

Jones and others believe that unless institutions are very intentional, they will have no understanding of how many of these 36 million students once attended classes through their programs, even though the data are available. "There are colleges that are elegant in their approach, and they're the ones that are winning in this marketplace for adult learners."

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS:
"AN INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY" CONTINUED

"Adult learners can be overwhelmed by the 'smorgasbord of the curriculum' and the effort to enroll."

Dr. Don Hossler, author/senior scholar, University of Southern California

INSTITUTIONAL GOALS STAND IN THE WAY

Dr. Robert Scott has a unique background as the only person to have held the three top positions in American higher education: head of a public institution, a state coordinating board, and a private university.

Overall, he believes higher ed has an organizational problem in that the following aren't aligned: mission, goals/priorities, use of resources, reward structure, and results. He said greater success could be achieved, especially for reengaging students, by more closely linking these pieces. He also thinks enrollment by design—creating a system for recruiting, enrolling, aiding, and advising students of all kinds, built around intake and outputs (i.e., degree completion) would be beneficial.

He further pointed out that the entire campus focus is on recruiting new students, which is driven by the fact that the following all examine enrollment data and elevate its importance: college ranking organizations, accreditation teams, bond rating agencies that ask about yield rate for new students, and grant-making foundations. Overall, the freshman profile is a major source of institutional prestige.

STUDENT CHALLENGES

Schools are also aware that potential returning students face many challenges, including child care and elder care responsibilities, existing college debt, and lack of awareness of options (such as certificate programs and stackable credentials).

Dr. Don Hossler is the author or co-author of 23 books and scholarly reports and is a leading researcher and scholar in the fields of college choice, student persistence, student financial aid policy, and enrollment management. He also served as vice chancellor for enrollment services at Indiana University Bloomington. Hossler said adult learners can also be overwhelmed by the "smorgasbord of the curriculum" and the effort it takes to enroll. These are people who frequently don't see themselves among those who can excel in college environments.

Hossler commented that there's a dearth of research about adult students who stopped out or never attended even though they were admitted.

The report *Money Matters: Understanding How Colleges and Universities Use Their Websites to Communicate Information about How to Pay College Costs* finds that many institutions fail to adhere to federal mandates concerning net price calculators. This leaves all students, but especially busy and skeptical adults, without the ability to access pertinent data and make informed choices.

SITUATIONAL ANALYSIS:
"AN INSTITUTIONAL RESPONSIBILITY" CONTINUED

Pandemic-related attrition in 2020 reached an unprecedented level.

National Student Clearinghouse Research Center, July 2021

Hossler recalled an interaction with one college leader who impatiently wanted to know why the admissions office didn't direct more transfer students their way. He had to explain that the professional school itself had created barriers that prevented a steady flow of returning and transfer students.

PROFESSIONAL SUPPORT NEEDED FOR THE ADMISSIONS OFFICE

Compounding all these issues is the fact that there's "zero training or coaching to help admission officers deal with adult learners," according to Mike Sexton, former vice president for enrollment management at Santa Clara University. He bases this view on his four decades of experience serving as an enrollment professional and conducting trainings for others in the field.

There's also a strong understanding that staffing levels to support traditional freshman and transfer students are significantly higher than staff devoted to reengaging students. At most institutions, there are no dedicated staff or offices focused on reengaging or re-enrolling students.

Sexton added that, in addition to admissions, the other campus office that brings in revenue is the development office. It never stops pursuing donations; if an alum donates just once, the school will continue to follow up with them. He believes this level of intensity and interest needs to be applied to students who left

without a degree. Scott pointed out the irony that many alumni offices count students who dropped out as alumni and try to solicit from them even as the enrollment management office ignores them.

A GROWING ISSUE

Experts believe the situation is growing more acute. Georgetown University's Center on Education and the Workforce reports that only 74 percent of students who entered college as first-time freshmen in fall 2019 returned to college for their second year, which was during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the returning rate for Black students fell to 64.9 percent, and for Latinx students it dropped 3.2 percentage points, from 71.8 percent to 68.6 percent. This situation represents what it calls an "unprecedented one-year drop."

Malik Brown, who runs the nonprofit Graduate! Philadelphia, said some minorities were already "under water" before COVID.

Successful Reengagement & Re-enrollment: A First-Mover Opportunity

The Roundtable participants agreed that higher education leaders need to make a definitive choice for their institution: either more fully commit to reengaging students or sit back and watch other universities blossom in their success with this sector.

RECOMMENDATIONS/NEXT STEPS

"Rethinking what adults need when they return to campus requires extra creativity and attention."

Dr. Don Hossler, author/senior scholar, University of Southern California

Roundtable members highlighted the work of the National Institute for the Study of Transfer Students and its annual National Transfer Student Week, which focuses on challenging assumptions, building empathy, and instilling transfer pride on campuses. It was suggested leaders should think about a similar type of event for reengaging students.

FUNDING A REENGAGEMENT EFFORT

Hossler said that in terms of pursuing resources, advocates should never ask for base funding. They should always pursue one-time dollars to support reengaging student efforts by retaining experienced consultants. "CFOs and presidents get nervous about adding a lot of staff that start to look like permanent salary commitments, and there's a hesitancy to fire anyone." Sexton concurred that the admissions officer needs to meet with and build a relationship with the school's chief financial officer (CFO).

Sexton also said higher ed staff will succeed at reengaging students by relying on a combination of technology and outside consulting. Regarding the latter, he said a president "isn't just going to find a new full-time employee to do all of this; an outside consultant might be the most efficient way to reach these goals for many schools." Sexton suggested starting a pilot program that can help the CFO see that this effort will affect the bottom line. The registrar's office is often in charge of readmitting students; however, people in these positions aren't necessarily known for their flexibility or for being recruiters, according to Sexton. He said the growth of the one-stop shop used in many enrollment operations is very positive and should be emulated; it includes staff with knowledge of financial aid, admissions, advising, registrar's office functions, and more—all focused on getting the student back on track.

SERVING RETURNING STUDENTS

Hossler said rethinking what adults need when they return to campus requires extra creativity and attention. He mentioned a college that gave each adult student a designated parking spot on campus to make it easy for them to attend. Another approach is to ask adult students what services they need to succeed.

Sexton said, "We're probably better suited now [post-pandemic] as far as infrastructure to address students who have left—we're used to doing things online, asynchronously; it's not a 9-to-5 world anymore. I think it's helping, but reengaging students still needs to be in someone's job description."

RECOMMENDATIONS/NEXT STEPS CONTINUED

> "It's important for institutions to have multiple pathways for returning students."
>
> Dr. Robert Scott, president emeritus, Adelphi University

UNDERSTANDING WHY STUDENTS LEAVE

Sexton recommended that universities ask those who leave without a degree to take an exit interview where they're asked why they're leaving; answers would likely include personal and financial reasons, but the departing students would probably cite other reasons the institution doesn't know about. Such an interview, months in the future, could even ask them what it would take to get them back.

Scott added that the chief academic officers need to be part of these conversations about reengaging students because often the credit requirements are too onerous. It's also important for institutions to have multiple pathways for returning students. For instance, they should offer online courses for students who have moved away from campus.

Others who have a role to play in accelerating reengagement and re-enrollment include members of the board of trustees, alumni, and employers.

According to Brown, "Greater training and educational investments in our lower-skilled populations generate positive returns for business, at-risk communities, and the region at large. Perhaps now, more than ever before, is a transformative moment in time when colleges and workforce providers invent new paradigms of collaboration and partnership both with the business community and with local government."

A TIME-SENSITIVE IMPERATIVE

Ultimately, the Roundtable participants agreed that higher education leaders need to make a definitive choice at their institutions: either more fully commit to reengaging students or sit back and watch other universities blossom in their success with this sector.

A SUCCESSFUL RE-ENROLLMENT APPROACH: OPERATION REENGAGE

LIPMAN HEARNE was one of the first higher education marketing agencies to recognize the need for specialized services to identify and assist adult learners in re-enrolling. In partnership with myFootpath, a national leader in innovative enrollment solutions, Lipman Hearne has developed Operation ReEngage: a comprehensive approach to assisting adult students in re-enrolling.

THE IMPACT OF OPERATION REENGAGE CAN BE MEASURED IN MANY WAYS, BUT THE MOST IMPORTANT AND MEANINGFUL ARE THESE NUMBERS:

1,170,000
QUALIFIED PROSPECTS

25,644
STUDENTS REACHED

Operation ReEngage has grown from the vision of its founder, a high school guidance counselor in Flint, Michigan, to a group of nationally established and respected postsecondary enrollment leaders. Our team has collectively reached, encouraged, and helped enroll 25,644 students in partnership with our higher education clients.

It's an impressive record, yet we know there's so much more to do. National Student Clearinghouse research revealed 36 million U.S. students who started college but didn't finish. Lipman Hearne has identified an additional group of potential higher ed prospects: those who were admitted but never enrolled in any college, a group it conservatively estimates at 14 million and calls the "nones."[1]

Our team's 20-plus-year track record offers a unique, comprehensive approach to identifying and succeeding in assisting these adult students in re-enrolling.

We do this through marketing, enrollment, and retention services provided to college and university clients. Our team has developed deep expertise in recruiting adult online students and in reducing the barriers adults face on the path to degree completion.

[1]Educationdata.org reports 3.2 million students start college in fall annually; the Hechinger Report cites research showing that up to 40% of low-income students who are admitted never attend any college. Since the number of students annually admitted to college is not known, Lipman Hearne uses enrollment data as a proxy and conservatively estimates 15% of those admitted did not attend over 29 years.

OPERATION REENGAGE

Operation ReEngage creates deep, collaborative partnerships that empower clients to bring the program in-house at the end of the contract.

Operation ReEngage brings back students who stopped out from higher ed: adults, traditional-age, transfers, master's—all students who had a prior affiliation with an institution. We also work with the large and growing population of students who made it as far as applying and being admitted to a college but never took a first course. We help students re-enroll (or enroll for the first time if they never started courses), get back on track, and graduate. **We provide the following:**

1 In-depth data analysis and management techniques to build a robust and powerful "reengagement, re-recruitment, and re-enrollment list" specific to each client institution.

2 Specially trained and dedicated staff who specialize in counseling and coaching adult students.

3 Client collaboration to develop and enhance the processes needed to successfully reengage, re-enroll, and work with students through graduation. Our goal is to help our clients build in-house capacity at their institutions and to hand over Operation ReEngage to an internal team at the conclusion of our relatively short contract period.

4 No-risk, tuition-share structure that allows institutions to quickly deploy Operation ReEngage resources, and see tangible net revenue gains in a short period of time.

Please contact us for a complimentary analysis to reveal the reengagement and net revenue potential at your institution.

Contact:

falexrod@lipmanhearne.com
310.874.6585

227 W Monroe Street, Floor 21
Chicago, IL 60606

myFOOTPATH

LIPMAN HEARNE.